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'Poet on Poet': Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes (Two Versions for an Aesthetic-Literary Theory)

'Poet on Poet': Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes (Two Versions for an Aesthetic-Literary Theory)

Mario Millanes Vaquero, Universidad Complutense de Madrid (Spain)

If I am going to be a poet at all, I am going to be POET
and not NEGRO POET.

Countee Cullen

A poet is a human being. Each human being must live
within his time, with and for his people, and within the
boundaries of his country.

Langston Hughes

Because the Negro American writer is the bearer of two
cultures, he is also the guardian of two literary traditions.

Robert Bone

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1 Introduction

Countee Cullen (1903-1946) and Langston Hughes (1902-1967) were two of the major figures of a movement later known as the Harlem Renaissance. Although both would share the same artistic circle and play an important role in it, Cullen's reputation was eclipsed by that of Hughes for many years after his death.

Fortunately, a number of scholars have begun to clarify their places in literary history. I intend to explain the main aspects in which their creative visions differ: Basically, Cullen's traditional style and themes, and Hughes's use of blues, jazz, and vernacular. I will focus on their debut books, *Color* (1925), and *The Weary Blues* (1926), respectively.

2 Poet on Poet

A review of *The Weary Blues* appeared in *Opportunity* on 4 March, 1926. It was not just a more or less positive critique of a series of poems and its author; the principal point of the text was its place in poetry. It was signed by Countee Cullen. At that moment, he was Hughes's only serious rival and was considered Harlem's "poet laureate" mainly because his work was "more palatable to the middle class" (Rampersad 1986a: 97). Hughes was branded as the "poet 'low-rate' of Harlem" — a pun alluding to his representation of Blacks (Rampersad 1986b: 151).

Hughes arrived in New York in 1921. The discovery of Harlem and its cultural life may have been the most important stage in his development as a writer. Hughes frequented the Branch Library, where he met Cullen in 1922, and a friendship grew. Cullen was the adopted son of the influential pastor of the Salem Methodist Episcopal Church. With "I Have a Rendezvous with Life," published in January 1921 in the almost all-white DeWitt Clinton's literary magazine, *The Magpie*, Cullen won his first contest, a

citywide competition for the best poem by a high school student. After that, Cullen won a place at New York University and then at Harvard. Hughes established himself as a bright young star of the New Negro Renaissance with his poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1921), which he would dedicate to W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963) (Hughes 1995: 23). "In certain ways," as Rampersad writes, "Cullen was Hughes's exact opposite. Plain where Hughes was very handsome, he was often a little stiff with strangers where Langston was shy but congenial. Cullen was religious, with a Bible at hand when he composed; Hughes was secular to the bone" (1986a: 63).

Cullen's analysis intended to prove the very different approach Hughes took to poetry. Although he considered Hughes "a remarkable poet of the colorful," Cullen wondered "if jazz poems really belong to that dignified company, that select and austere circle of high literary expression which we call poetry." His evaluation centred on a basic problem: "Never having been one to think all subjects and forms proper for poetic consideration, I regard these jazz poems as interlopers in the company of the truly beautiful poems in other sections of the book." He valued Hughes's distinctive and unique voice but found him a poet who put too much emphasis "on strictly Negro themes." Hughes's initial volume, innovative in form and themes, failed, in Cullen's opinion, "because of its dissociation from the traditionally poetic" (Cullen 1926: 74). Hughes believed in inspiration, improvisation, and free verse; Cullen practiced classical European forms such as epigrams, sonnets, and villanelles, "honed his rhymes, and searched mightily for the exact word" (Rampersad 1986a: 63).¹ Hughes admired Sandburg and Whitman; Cullen adored Housman and Keats.² He was the personification of the New Negro and great black hope, everything Hughes apparently was not.

In 1940, Bertram Woodruff pointed out: "To comprehend Cullen's poetry as a criticism of life — in fact, to understand it in its simplest meanings — one must know his views about life and poetry, about the substance of poetry, and about the function of poetry" (213). Obviously, Cullen's work differed from Hughes's; Cullen and Hughes did not share the same political, racial, and social motivation. He attacked jazz poems because he believed that they were not poetry at all. That new music called jazz was part of Hughes's folk heritage and fundamental for his poetic expression. There was a conflict among those being considered the Old Guard (Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, and Alain Locke) and the New Guard (Sterling Brown, Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston). The heart of the matter here is that "there were numerous attitudes toward folk materials, both in whether they should be used at all and, if so, how they would be employed most successfully" (Tracy: 17). In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois, then a thirty-five-year-old scholar, had expressed in a different, innovative, and original way his own interpretation about the situation of people of African descent like him.³ Each chapter in the book was purposely bicultural, for they were prefaced by

¹ See also Emanuel. Regarding style and subject matter, he compares the poetry by Cullen, Hughes, and Claude McKay.

² See Goldwebber; Primeau.

³ He was one of the greatest intellectual figures of the twentieth century. Du Bois was the first African-American to graduate from his high school; he did so in 1884, with high honours. He was also the first to earn a Ph.D.; from Harvard in 1895. During his long career, he published more than twenty books and literally thousands of essays and reviews. In 1952, well into his eighties, Du Bois was arrested and was handcuffed briefly. Although exonerated by the judge, he was ostracized by many African-American churches and schools because he had been branded a communist. In 1961 he wrote a letter of application to the Communist Party USA, and, at the end of his life, he became a Ghanaian citizen. He died at the age of ninety-four. Du Bois's influence on Hughes was even greater than the Bible, which his grandmother read to him when he was a child (Rampersad 1986: 19). Apparently Cullen, who would become his son-in-law, was ideologically nearer to him but Hughes was, according to Arna Bontemps, "the apple of his eye" (Harper 1986: 33). Hughes's title, *The Ways of White Folks* (1934), a collection of short stories, is his wordplay on the classic by one of the most influential black political thinkers.

an excerpt from a white poet and a bar of what Du Bois called the "Sorrow Songs". These spirituals were examples of the authentic black experience. Talking about the sorrow songs of his forebears, he was looking back to the times of slavery. Although Hughes did not forget the past, he lived within his time. His writing was centred in the present and in the future of African-Americans; his words were modern, real, and simple. For this reason, as Tracy puts it, "Hughes wrote more about blues than he did about gospel music in his lifetime" (Tracy 2004: 105). Younger artists had to face what Schwarz defines as the "burden of representation" (32-47). Hughes, with extraordinary skill, portrayed the faith, humour, and wit of the Negro. He proudly used the language and spontaneity of his community. But his poetry was unacceptable to the wealthy elite because it reflected a certain kind of black experience they had no intention of admitting. With poems like "Negro," "Beggar Boy," "Young Prostitute," "Jazzonia," "Cabaret," "Young Singer," "My People," and so on, Hughes revealed a different beauty to the bourgeois intellectual class (1995: 24, 29, 33, 34, 35, 36). Cullen, as Hutchinson puts it, "felt Hughes and others were being misled by white critics encouraging a vernacular approach (to Cullen, stereotypical treatments of black life)" (188).

3 Africa, Friendship, and Gay Voices

It was not until the Twenties that Africa became a compelling and positive symbol in African-American literature. One of the best examples is the poem "Heritage" (1925: 36-41), where Cullen wonders:

What is Africa to me:
Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronzed men, or regal black
Women from whose loins I sprang
When the birds of Eden sang?
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?
So I lie, who all day long
Want no sound except the song
Sung by wild barbaric birds
Goading massive jungle herds,
Juggernauts of flesh that pass
Trampling tall defiant grass
Where young forest lovers lie,
Plighting troth beneath the sky.
[...]

As Jones affirms, Cullen "reflects doubts about whether American Blacks can find a true sense of identity by going back to African roots" (263). Here, Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness" was not "necessarily exclusively racially defined" (Schwarz: 54).⁴ Africa, in some ways, embarrassed him; and although Cullen attacked racial prejudice, he found no particular beauty in the black masses, as Hughes did. The only one of them who had ever visited the motherland was Hughes but, as he notes in his autobiography, this encounter was anything but inspirational because the Africans he met refused to believe that he was Black. "It was the only place in the world where I've

⁴ Powers argues that "the aesthetic work of the Harlem Renaissance turned not simply on the question of race but around the nexus of race and gender" (664).

ever been called a white man," he wrote (1997: 103). "[A] new race-consciousness and a newly urgent racial pride" were necessary. African-Americans had suffered from "popular misunderstandings of evolutionary theory," and "many assumed that the Blacks' ancestors had but lately descended from the trees." Hughes made clear through his poems that "it was indeed important to be able to have come from the creators of the pyramids and other ancient glories" (Jones: 263-264).

Before experiencing several West African ports, as Hughes wrote in *The Big Sea* (1940), he had to break with his past:

Melodramatic maybe, it seems to me now. But then it was like throwing a million bricks out of my heart when I threw the books into the water. I leaned over the rail of the S.S. *Malone* and threw the books as far as I could out into the sea — all the books I had had at Columbia, and all the books I had lately bought to read (3).

After his return from Africa something changed. In a letter to Locke, Cullen's description of Hughes was: "Langston is back from his African trip looking like a virile brown god" (Schwarz: 162n60). Hughes had not given the slightest indication of sexual interest in women and Cullen deduced that he must be gay. By the time of his friendship with Hughes, Cullen had strong homosexual feelings and was clearly interested in having an affair with him, something Hughes was not conscious of.⁵ As Rampersad explains, "Cullen decided to help another friend, one more worldly, who might succeed with Hughes where he had failed." That man was Alain Locke.⁶ A Howard professor trained in philosophy, the classics, and German culture, he was race-conscious and wanted to promote a cultural movement "that would bring credit to Afro-America." Initially, Hughes wanted to enter Howard; Locke wanted him in bed (1986a: 66-67, 92).

Cullen's sexual conviction did not relieve his sense of guilt, for he always felt a strong religious obligation. Ironically, he expected to marry — and did so twice. He dated Fiona, daughter of the writer William Stanley Braithwaite, and Yolande Du Bois, daughter of the African-American leader, who became his first wife. If we pay attention to this, it corroborates that he "tried to marry a woman of high social standing who would enhance his reputation" (Schwarz: 160n17, 163n102).⁷ In November 1924, although the exact cause of the break is unknown, the friendship with Cullen ended. Hughes took the initiative. He was highly secretive about his sexuality and "would become only more so throughout his life." Countee "prided himself on quarreling with no one. Langston, too, found it hard all his life even to strain a friendship" (Rampersad 1986a: 98).

4 The (Negro) Poet

In June 1926, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes's provocative manifesto, appeared in *The Nation*:

One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, "I want to be a poet — not a Negro poet," meaning, I believe, "I want to write like a white

⁵ Cullen dedicated "To a Brown Boy" to Hughes. Slightly embarrassed, Langston admitted: "I don't know what to say about the 'For L. H.' but I appreciate it, and I like the poem" (Rampersad 1986a: 63). Cullen omitted it in *Color*.

⁶ Cullen wrote in a letter to Locke: "I do wish you and Langston could get together and understand one another" (Schwarz: 163n88).

⁷ Many saw the wedding "of a new Adam and a new Eve, exemplars of a New Negro race to be" (Powers: 666). Rather than with his wife, Cullen spent his honeymoon with Harold Jackman in Paris. See Hughes's view in *The Big Sea*: 274-275.

poet"; meaning subconsciously, "I would like to be a white poet"; meaning behind that, "I would like to be white" (692).

That poet was none other than Cullen, who wanted to be known simply as a poet, an attitude Hughes interpreted as a little perverse. Hughes had used his words almost literally in order to explain his own point of view. Harlemites loved Hughes but "revered" Cullen, "he was the proper poet with proper credentials" (Lewis: 77). Hughes wanted to establish a new aesthetic style, which he experimented in journals like *Fire!!* (1926) and *Harlem* (1928), neither of which lasted beyond the first issue. Cullen deeply respected the classics and, above all, he wished to be seen as a poet who happened to be Negro:

This is what has hindered the development of artists among us. Their one note has been the concern with their race. That is all very well, none of us can get away from it. I cannot at times. You will see it in my verse. The consciousness of this is too poignant at times. I cannot escape it. But what I mean is this: I shall not write of negro subjects for the purpose of propaganda. That is not what a poet is concerned with. Of course, when the emotion rising out of the fact that I am a negro is strong, I express it. But that is another matter (Sperry).

Contrary to Du Bois, who uttered that "all art is propaganda and ever must be" (296), Cullen's option was "art for art's sake." At that time the question of the "New Negro," as expressed by black leaders, "was in vogue," as Hughes would say (1997: 223-233). But it was perceived by many whites as "the old romantic conception of the Negro covered with a patina of cultural primitivism and exoticism fashionable in the 1920's" (Fredrickson: 327). To this, Cullen and Hughes gave different responses because they did not want to be just primitive. Hughes instructed Cullen that his "poetry of sound" implied "the beginning of a new era" (Rampersad 1986a: 64). As Sánchez-Pardo observes, Cullen "felt that there was very little free space for him to develop his creative potential between traditionalism and the New Negro modernism" (352); social and political action were not the poet's task. Hughes's personal view was expressed when the poem "To Certain Intellectuals" (1925) was published in *The Messenger*.

You are no friend of mine
For I am poor,
Black,
Ignorant and slow,—
Not your kind.
You yourself
Have told me so,—
No friend of mine (1995: 43).

5 Conclusions

For all their differences, Hughes and Cullen admired each other. By choosing different forms and themes, they made aesthetic and ethical choices. Hughes's goal was to represent common Negro life in an authentic manner; Cullen's scrutiny of Hughes's poetry collection showed his own preferences. While Cullen followed the tradition of classical English poetry with cryptic allusions, strict measures, and regimented rhyme schemes, Hughes focused on the language and rhythms of his people. By the end of his essay, it is clear that Cullen's artistic judgments and moral notions derived from different sources than those of Hughes. In any case, they were thoughtful interlocutors on equally creditable sides of the racial debate.

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